

# Reflecting Regional Identity in Building Entrances: Reflections on the Emerging Trends in Institutional Gate Houses, Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

*Reflecting on emerging trends in the built environment is significant in understanding the past, present and future of the local and global aspects of human development. This paper focuses on gate houses in institutional buildings and explores the emerging trends in designing entrances and the underlying factors that forced their change along, with their contribution to regional identity.*

*The research adopted a qualitative methodology where data generated through a photographic survey and a literature survey were analysed to reflect some thoughts. Through the study four typologies in contemporary Sri Lankan entrances were identified. Reflections included that framing the entrance with a roof on top is a new trend and this is influenced by traditional structures in Sri Lanka, in response to the changing social, economic and cultural trends thus contributing to an authentic regional identity.*

*Keywords: Contemporary Trends, Regional Identity, Traditional Architecture, Entrance Gate Houses*

## 1. Introduction

'Change' is nature. Everything in the universe is subjected to change. Socio-political, economic and environmental changes within a time frame cause the emergence of new trends. The built environment is always greatly influenced by these new trends as it is a mirror of its ambient society. In the contemporary world there is a trend to create a universal global uniformity through the concept of globalization. In this arena, Sustainable design, Green architecture, Bio-mimicry, Modular design, etc. are becoming the most popular concepts in contemporary architecture. Hence, there is a danger of producing monotonous built environments with no diversity or identity.

Further, cultural diversity and regional identity are also highly appreciated

phenomena throughout the contemporary world. It would be true if said that the reason why humanity has survived this long is because of the diversity of languages and cultures. The built environment plays a vital role in reflecting cultural diversity and regional identity in any context. Therefore, all professionals involved in the construction sector are responsible to consciously react to the aforesaid aspects for the betterment of humanity.

Having come out of the thirty year civil war, Sri Lanka is heading towards rapid development in many spheres. Contributions made by the built environment in to this development are crucial and outstanding. There are a variety of trends that make an impact on

the regional identity of the country that could be identified amidst these fast growing built environments. In this context prominence obtained by architectural elements in the built environment are subjected to change. The entrance to a building premise is one such element that is facing such change. At present entrances are becoming prominent with elements such as; grand and solid gates/doors, gable roofs, green terraces on top, cement pots or water usage, etc. Further, they have become complex buildings with additional activities such as; guard room, ticketing out-let, waiting lobby, wash room, food outlet, etc. and are named as 'Gate Houses'. This change is mainly due to the aspirations of the people in the context. Thus it could be identified as a contemporary trend in Sri Lankan entrance designs.

## **2. Emerging trends in the contemporary built environment: Globalization vs. Regionalism**

Among many trends found within contemporary built environments the emergence of regionalism, to counter the impacts of globalization depicts interesting developments.

According to Mostafa Eldemery (2009), the new millennium is confronting the tension between the forces of globalization, which has been widely debated as a distinguishing trend of the present moment, and its impact on local architecture and the efforts to ensure local identity and distinctiveness through architecture, where globalization is seen as a multidimensional phenomenon. Architects very often find themselves at the centre of two opposing forces existing as a result of contrasting past or

present cultures and architectures, along with their attendant values and methods of expression.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines globalization as the process by which the experience of everyday life becomes standardized around the world. Therefore, theorists see it either as a necessary and positive vehicle of progress and diversity, or as a force of insipid homogenization and destruction.

The tension between anti-global and pro-global forces has long existed, with two opposing forces affecting architectural globalization. One force seeks to safeguard and promulgate established indigenous architectural traditions, forms, decorative motifs, and technologies. It advocates historical continuity, cultural diversity, and preservation of identity, all symbolized by a particular architectural vocabulary, just as spoken languages and local dialects impart identity. The other force promotes invention and dissemination of new forms using new technologies and materials in response to changing functional needs and sensibilities. For some, globalization entails the westernization of the world. Some see globalization as generating increasing homogeneity, while others see it producing diversity and heterogeneity through increased hybridization.

Since the built environment is a strong reflection of cultural diversity, architecture plays a major role in promoting regional identity against rapid globalization trends. Architects around the globe have attempted, through various mechanisms, to bring regionalism into architecture, understanding the criticality of losing an identity and trying to capture the true identity of a region that is inculcated deeply within a culture.

### 3. Regionalism

There is a fundamental relationship between formal attributes, experience of place, and regional identity. Architecture should be designed through the understanding of these relationships, which can be further divided into built form, natural form, social interaction, and cognitive processes. In this way an authentic sense of architecture and regional identity can be revealed.

In a broader sense regionalism could be achieved in two different ways; 'imposed regionalism' and 'authentic regionalism'. Imposed regionalism is achieved through the direct imitation of historic/traditional elements and building forms (replicas). In Sri Lanka, soon after independence in 1948, nationalistic movements gave birth to a style called, 'pseudo-traditional style'. The buildings that emerged from this trend were replicas of historical buildings and reflected imposed regionalism. Independence Square in Colombo, Sri Lanka which is a concrete replica of the Kandyan Audience hall constructed during the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C. is a fine example of such imposed regionalism.



Fig.5: Imposed regionalism: Independence Square, Colombo, Sri Lanka (Source: Author)

'Authentic regionalism' is not frozen in time. It involves a critical synthesis of a region's history and tradition and their reinterpretation and finally the expression of these in modern terms. One of the key characteristics of authentic regionalism is the way it attempts to revive and reinterpret local building traditions to achieve a synthesis with modern architectural forms. Curtis (1986) states, "at its best, regionalism penetrates to the generating principles and symbolic substructures of the past then transforms these into forms that are right for the changing social order of the present." For Buchanan (1983), regionalism "must be a genuine hybrid, a totally new configuration which may include a remembrance of the past, but transformed or framed in terms of its significance for today."

Frampton (1996) began his essay, 'Prospects for a Critical Regionalism', by identifying the resolution of tradition and modernity as the central paradox of our time. Advocates of regionalism promote the revival and reinterpretation of tradition as an oppositional strategy. For Frampton, regionalism offers "the sole possibility" of resisting the "universal Megalopolis", or that "ceaseless inundation of a place-less, alienating consumerism." Further it is believed that regionalism becomes a constant process of negotiation between the local and the global.

Amidst this ongoing debate between globalization and regionalism, and constant search to reflect regional identity through architecture, the architecture of people (without professional architects) seem to have a greater influence on main stream architectural styles in contemporary built

environments. This has generated more favour for the preservation and continuity of authentic regional identity.

#### 4. Contemporary Trends in Sri Lankan Entrances

Inheriting a long history that runs over 2500 years, the native traditions found within the Sri Lankan context are numerous. Different architectural forms, settlements patterns as well as architectural elements that have risen within native traditions are found around the country. Among many elements in architecture that reflects strong regional traditions, entrances seem to show clear distinctive features in recent times.

The entrance trends have evolved due to various reasons: the historical model, socio- cultural needs, and as reflections of

cultural identity. Combinations of these have given rise to entrances that reflect the regional identity as well.

#### 4.1 Historical model

First impressions are important. Even if one cannot recall all the details of a house or garden that has been visited, it is likely one remembers its entrance. Entrances not only provide security and privacy for the interior activities, but also are considered to be transitional spaces that could influence the user's psychology and behaviour.

Eastern cultures seem to place a greater emphasis on entrances with deep philosophical meanings, than in western cultures. Ancient Sri Lankan entrances are fine examples of this emphasis.



Fig.6: (clockwise) Polonnaruwa Vatadage (11<sup>th</sup>C.AD), Sigiriya rock fortress (5<sup>th</sup> C.AD), Lankathilake vihara (14<sup>th</sup>C.AD), Yapahuwa fortress (12<sup>th</sup> C.AD).

Figure 6 shows ancient entrances from Sri Lanka, and all of them clearly indicate the prominence given to entrances by framing and highlighting them with ornamentation. Contemporary trends have been influenced by these traditional ornamentation and framing of entrances.

#### ***4.2 The roofed entrance of hospitality***

Further, most traditional Sri Lankan entrances are roofed structures with a sense of intimacy. The roof is a

prominent element in tropical climatic regions as it provides protection from harsh weather conditions such as sun, glare and rain. Therefore a roof at the entrance to a building or a building complex provides physical and psychological comfort and reflects hospitality towards the user. Most entrances with roofs are spacious structures that provide users with other facilities such as seating. These entrances are commonly referred to as ‘gate houses’.



Fig.7: Entrance gate houses with roofs : (Clockwise) Natha Devale-Kandy(13<sup>th</sup> C.AD), Maha Saman Devale-Rathnapura(13<sup>th</sup> C.AD), Ambakke Devale-Kandy (14<sup>th</sup> C.AD),Lankathilake Vihara-Kandy(14<sup>th</sup> C.AD).



During the Colonial period (1505-1948), entrances in the Sri Lankan context underwent many changes reflecting many European styles such as Baroque, Rococo, etc. and were never roofed. The gate of the house called 'Lakshmigiri' at Alfred house estate; Colombo which was built in 1911 reflects Baroque style and resembles the gate at Buckingham palace, London.

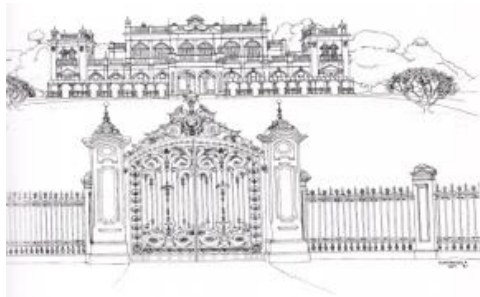


Fig. 8: Lakshmigiri, Alfred house estate, Colombo.

(Source: Babara Sansoni, Architecture of an Island) and Buckingham palace, London (Source: Author)

Figure 8 and 9 are two examples of colonial influenced entrances without the roofed entrances of earlier times, but where contemporary trends are seen.

### 4.3 Changing socio-cultural needs

During the thirty year long civil war period (1980s to 2010) the socio-cultural, political and economical needs and aspirations of Sri Lankan people changed drastically, causing many changes to the entrance designs. Generally there was a greater need for a sense of security. As a response to these needs, new entrance trends reflected entrances with an enclosed introverted character.

## 5. Typologies in contemporary Sri Lankan entrances

Domestic entrances display trends contributing to the regional identity as well. Even though occupants were not keen on reflecting an identity through the house, the entrance was given prominence which reflected the sense of a gate house.

The gatehouses also differ in type and four distinct entrance types were identified: (1) the roofed entrance (2) framed entrance (3) planted entrance (4) gate and porch entrance.

### 5.1 The roofed entrance

These types of entrances are commonly found with a small roof above entrance gate or door. The roof is constructed with various materials in various forms.



Figure 10: domestic roofed entrances

### 5.2 Framed entrance

In urban settings where these entrances are commonly found, the entrance is

framed within the boundary wall. Sometimes the smaller entrance is recessed with a steel grill gate and timer door.



Figure 11: domestic framed entrances



### ***5.3 Planted entrance***

This is an entrance where the roof is planted with flowering plants. Sometimes even pots are kept on top of the entrance. The most commonly found type is the framed entrance with flowers on top.



Figure 12: domestic planted entrances

### ***5.4 Gate and Porch entrance***

This type of entrance is a modification to the old type two sashes or sliding gate with a porch or garage built within the garden. These are done in such a way that when taken as a whole the entrance looks as if it is a roofed entrance.







Figure 13: domestic gate and porch entrances

## 6. Case studies-institutional Gate Houses, Sri Lanka

The four domestic types have influenced the emerging gate houses in institutional buildings and they seem to incorporate these features at a larger scale. Apart from merely being the gate, many gate houses also serve the purpose of security lodging and information counter as well. In addition to the four domestic types identified, institutional gate houses also have another tower type gate house where the entrance is demarcated by two towers on either side of the gate. This is

not the usual gate post but a larger tower with a roof.

The domestic entrance types that emerged as a trend are now being adopted by institutions to make a clear mark of their contribution to the regional identity. They also reflect the historical form of the entrance, giving one a sense of Sri Lankan traditional architecture which could rightfully provide the roots for a regionally identity. When looking through older buildings it is commonly found that, the earlier type of the gate entrance had smaller gate posts or no gate posts at all.





Figure 14: older institutional entrances

### 6.1 Roofed entrance

Roofed entrances are done at a larger scale and with varying styles. In many instances, other services are also included within the gatehouse complex.



Figure 15: Institutional roofed entrances



## 6.2 Framed entrance

Framed entrances are the commonly used to give dominance to the entrance.



Figure 16: Institutional framed entrances

## 6.3 Planted entrance

These types of entrances are not commonly found within entry points, but are found in complexes where the security post is situated. However the entry points into the southern expressway have been influenced by this type of entrances.





Figure 17: Institutional planted entrances

#### ***6.4 Gate and porch entrance***

Again, these types of entrances are not commonly found since entrances into institutions are at a wider scale and therefore it is not practical to have a porch inside.



Figure 18: institutional gate and porch entrances

#### ***6.5 Tower entrance***

These types of entrances comprise of two separate towers where sometimes the security is enclosed within the tower.





Figure 19: Institutional tower gates

## 7. Concluding Remarks

In a time where many regions, countries, cities, and individuals are seeking for an identity lost to the homogenising forces of globalization, a contribution from a trend within the community becomes precious.

These entrance trends have captured the historical model as well as reflect the changing socio economic conditions. Further they are trying to preserve the cultural identity of a nation rich in hospitality.

The adoption of a similar trend within institutional gate houses becomes important in consecrating it as a regional element in the built environment. This is a positive trend that must be nurtured and developed so that our entrances reflect a sense of a different architectural style rooted within our historical forms.

These trends are quite different from the post-independence movements,

where we were borrowing elements from history, whereas in this modern trend the social needs have created these unique elements. Historically houses were built with open verandas with an extroverted character. But due to changing social conditions and as there is a greater need for security, modern houses have become introverted and enclosed. However, the entrance has become a key element in communicating and reflecting an identity that could become a regionally salient element.

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